BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN TRANSRACIAL/TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTEES ENGAGING IN ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY WORK

By

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As members of the Master's Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by **Hannah Hyun White**, titled **"Between Two Worlds: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Asian American Transracial/Transnational Adoptees Engaging in Activism and Advocacy Work"** and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Master's Degree.

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Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the thesis to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this thesis prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the Master's requirement.

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DEDICATION

To the scholars who have fought and are fighting to amplify and write the voices of transracial adoptees into existence, this thesis is a product of your work.

To the educators and practitioners who have devoted their careers to empowering transracial adoptees through education and engagement, this thesis was inspired by your vision.

And to all the transracial adoptees, past, present, and future, this thesis is a consequence of our existence. Keep fighting. Our voices are powerful, our stories matter, and our victories are collective; this thesis is ours.

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ABSTRACT

Transracial adoptees blur a line between race, ethnicity, and culture—working through a space between how they identify themselves and how others perceive them. Although they are still marginalized/oppressed and seen as inferior to the dominant white race in society, they are still treated and perceived by their peers as being white. Despite the *increasing number of transracial adoptees (TRA)* on college campuses, numerous higher education faculty and scholars are either unfamiliar with the transracial adoptee student community or do not engage in the topic. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees, and how their engagement in activism and advocacy work supports their racial identity development in finding their own sense of agency, empowerment, and resiliency, as well as the nuances and complexities that come with being an Asian American transracial adoptee.

Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

Between Two Worlds

My Own Truth[1]

Identifying as Asian American and a transracial adoptee (TRA), I often feel I am between two worlds because of my two salient identities. On one side, I'm a person of color navigating a system that wasn't built for me. But on the other side I am constantly told I don't experience "real" racism or at all for that matter because I am Asian American. It continues to feel complicated identifying as a TRA, because my parents are white [2]and I know I have benefited from certain privileges and navigated this world differently because of them. Growing up as an Asian American transracial adoptee, I have constantly sat between two worlds. I have struggled to navigate my way through spaces in how people perceive and racialize me, but also how I identify myself. Being adopted at a young, and especially into a white family and a dominant white culture, my narrative was already written and decided for me; I never had a chance to write my own story and moreover, be empowered to share it. I constantly questioned if I was good enough and grappling with the reality I was a disappointment because of preconceived ideas and assumptions of who I should be. I constantly found myself feeling guilty and apologizing for everything I did and working through feelings of being "enough." So what does it mean for me to be an Asian American transracial adoptee?

Storytelling has become a powerful tool for me in expressing what it means for me to be an Asian American transracial adoptee. Museus (2013) quotes Chon (1995) and Delgado (1989) in saying, "storytelling is a tenet that is grounded in CRT scholars' belief that oppressed people have stories that can constitute valuable knowledge and can counter dominant hegemonic narratives" (pg. 20). In having an invisible identity that is often overlooked or unrecognized by scholars and practitioners, storytelling has given myself and so many others a voice and space to have our narratives heard, acknowledged, and valued. My experiences engaging in opportunities to fight for racial justice and equity in college, as well as personal narratives, continue to shape my identity as I navigate the system, continue my journey to cultivate greater resistance and agency, and learn to run my own race.

Since that day I was given life, my narrative had already been created for me – who I am, what I should be, and who I'm supposed to become. I never had the opportunity to create my own story, and that was a painful aspect that became a significant part of who I am and my fight and ambition in life. I was born on May 13, 1995, in a small town just outside Seoul, Korea. My birth mother and birth father were never legally married, and according to the documents, my parents split because of irreconcilable differences. Consequently, my birth father and three older siblings do not know who I am are or that I even exist. Shortly after my birth mother came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to care for a baby by herself. Realizing that it

[1] These stories shared are written with the premise that my personal perspective is uniquely my own

[2] I intentionally do not capitalize white in my own writing out of dedication to centering the leadership, narratives, and truths of the people I am writing about. Until there is justice and equal treatment in our society as a whole, I will not use equal treatment in language, which only serves to whitewash cultural context, identity, and hxstory

would be for me to grow up in a better environment full of parental love, and emotional, financial, and educational support, she gave me up for adoption the day I was born. On September 21, 1995, I became a transracial adoptee. I grew up in Arizona with a white cisgender, heterosexual mother and father. While I recognize the privilege that came with my adoption, there is still a deeper level of trauma that no one will ever fully understand.

Being a transracial adoptee I constantly blur lines between race, ethnicity, and culture – working through a space that is somewhere in between how I identify myself and how others perceive, treat, and define me.

Growing up, my family had a colorblind attitude towards my race. They did not recognize me as a person of color and it was constantly reinforced in my head that I was not Asian. My family's acceptance and my identity often depended on their own interpretation of racial identities. Because of these experiences, I have often felt pressure to racially assimilate into the white culture, disregard my Asian American identity, and feel ashamed of being a transracial adoptee.

In college, I met my undergraduate mentor while being a part of the APIDA cultural center. He was the first person to empower me to shape my own identity, embrace being a Korean transracial adoptee (KAD), and I began to find my place in racial justice activism. I learned just how powerful students are. Inspired by the demonstration done by our Black Student Union at UA and the students at the University of Missouri, myself and a group of student leaders from the various cultural and resource centers united and formed the Marginalized Students of the University of Arizona (MSUA). As a student movement group, our goal is to push boundaries and force administration to hear and see us. We wanted administration to address our needs as marginalized populations. Together with all our cultural and resource centers, we created a list of demands that was released to the entire university community. These demands emphasized the addressing issues including but not limited to: lack of campus wide cultural competency, explicit and implicit racism, homophobia, and sexism. Our actions and desire to make a change resulted in the President creating a Diversity Task Force and placed pressure on the President which conceivably influenced her decision to step down from her position in 2018.

MSUA is a legacy we created, however, our actions and demands did not come without consequence. We faced backlash from our outside parties, the media, students and faculty at the UA. In my own experience, I was seen as the loud, outspoken, and angry Asian. People did not like me expressing my voice, especially those within my own community. I was told time and time again that I am not a "true" Asian because I was raised by white people and will never fully understand what it means to be Asian American. So, this all goes back to what does it mean for me to identify as an Asian American transracial adoptee? I have struggled to answer this question for a long time, but engaging in racial justice activism has supported me in understanding the significance and finding my own agency, empowerment, and resilience. I know my fight will always exist; but every experience and obstacle I face will continue to inspire the work I do in my resistance against the institution and system, fighting for equity and racial justice, and reframing what it means to be an Asian American transracial adoptee.

A Salient Identity

While theory informs practice, I feel we often forget what informs theory; the stories and lived experiences of students in our own institutions. My own experiences as an Asian American transracial adoptee student have motivated the work I do and served as a piece for informing this thesis. I chose to open with my own personal narrative above to highlight the power and significance of how storytelling and personal narratives can be powerful tools for learning and catalysts of agency, empowerment, and resilience.

My narrative is a glimpse into the complexity of Asian American transracial adoptee (TRA) identity; emphasizing the ways in which Asianization processes that frame Asian Americans as inferior, and my experiences of marginalization within the Asian American community, making it difficult to identify as an Asian American transracial adoptee at certain points in my life. My story also emphasizes how my intersecting identities have mutually shaped my experiences. As an Asian American womxn[3], society constrains the ways in which I am able to resist racial oppression and identifying as a transracial adoptee shapes the ways in which I experience exclusion within the Asian American community. In addition, my story highlights how Asian Americans engage in strategic (anti-)essentialism through coalition-building to advance racial justice, but also how the marginalization of Asian American and transracial adoptee voices within these coalitions can lead to diminishing the desire and agency to resist oppression as well.

My journey is one of many narratives that are often misunderstood in the ways in which systems of oppression and engaging in activism and advocacy work shape the experiences of

[3] Throughout this thesis, I utilize feminist versions of words that traditionally privilege men within them—womxn instead of women and hxstory instead of history. This is to denote gender inclusivity, bring awareness on patriarchal institutions and the consequential injustices faced by womxn, and represent resistance to patriarchal linguistic norms.

Asian American transracial adoptees and identity development. My pathway highlights how context, stories, and agency are interconnected with the ways in which make people make sense of their racial identities. But there is still a need for a greater understanding of and dialogue around these complexities, and the underlying question that informed this study: **How does engaging in activism and advocacy work support Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees in making meaning of their racial identities?**

I began by briefly describing the history of transracial/transnational adoption. The following sections include key concepts that informed this thesis, including the model minority myth, my proposed term, "model-model minorities," and racial identity development of transracial adoptees. I them moved into my problem statement, research questions, and significance of study, before defining key terms utilized in this thesis. Following, I provided an overview of the existing literature on Asian American identity development, transracial adoptees, Critical Race Theory and AsianCrit, and Asian American activism. I move into my third chapter in describing my methodology and methods for this study and the data collection procedures, process, and limitations. I concluded my thesis with discussing the findings from my study and my recommendations and implications for theory and practice.

Progression of Transracial/Transnational Adoption

Transracial adoption is defined as "the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families" (Silverman, 1993, p. 104) and occurs through various forms of domestic and international adoption. On May 25, 1953, in the last weeks of the Korean War, a picture was released with the headline "100,000 Korean Children Are War Orphans" (Park Nelson, 2016). The article described the Korean children that had been separated from their families, or "orphaned," during the war (Park Nelson, 2016). Park

Nelson (2016) asserts that the emphasis on the children of war was not a new concept to be seeing in the newspapers, but it ultimately led to a completely new concept of creating families: transnational adoption on demand and supported by a new globalized adoption industry. Adoption from South Korea would continue for the next sixty years, even long after the country had healed from the effects of war, and the South Korean partnerships with the United States would go on to serve as a model for many other countries that sought to send children away through overseas adoption (transnational adoption) (Park Nelson, 2016). Park Nelson (2016) also mentions that in addition, for richer and more powerful countries where the need for adoptable children would contribute to the most privileged form of contemporary immigration. Starting at a time when Asian immigration in the United States was essentially "illegal," this population of Asian child migrants coming to America would soon total to over 100,000 (Park Nelson, 2016). The United States passed the Refugee Relief Act, which allowed Korean children of U.S. military men to be brought to the states (Kim, 1995). Advocating for them as children of white Americans would provide them easy access to immigration and citizenship in comparison to other immigrants (Park Nelson, 2016).

Media continued to document the arrival of Korean children to the United States as the adopted sons and daughters of American citizens (Park Nelson, 2016). The imagery of the "pitiful" orphan in Korean adoption discourse has a long-standing practice of sentimental media depictions of children in order to develop political will around nationalist policies (Park Nelson, 2016). In doing so, it provoked sympathies for children that were in the middle of these conflicts (Park Nelson, 2016). In drawing attention to these children of America's Cold War ambitions, who otherwise might be invisible, it reinforced a narrative of American moral and economic superiority (Park Nelson, 2016).

Adoption from Korea to the United States increased throughout the years in 1970's through the 1990's (Nelson, 2016). According to Park Nelson (2016), at this point in time, adoption from Korea still dominated transnational adoption conversations and was sold to the public both through the idea of heroism of the adoptive parents and as a way for American families to be culturally engaged at a time of an increasing interest in multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was seen as a progressive ideology in adoptive families, with indications of white privilege, cultural appropriation and the problematic implications of racial colorblindness distinguished between the lines (Park Nelson, 2016).

Although stories around racial harmony of transnationally adoptive families continue to be published today, a more complicated discussion of racial and cultural identity of Korean adoptees started to appear in the 1990's (Park Nelson, 2016). Still, even with these conversations happening, coverage of Korean adoption focused on the "positive" impacts of adoption (Park Nelson, 2016). The dominant narratives surrounding transnational and transracial adoption seemed to be a temporary solution for racism, or at least portray racial divides in the United States were beginning to heal (Park Nelson, 2016).

In our current day, we are now seeing an increase of transracial and transnational adoptions occurring across Asian countries (i.e. Korea, China, Vietnam, Philippines etc.). According to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (2003), it is now estimated that 15% of all foster care adoptions can be considered transracial adoptions. Additionally, international adoptions account for approximately 85% of all transracial adoptions based on estimates of past and present adoption figures of non-related racial/ethnic minority children (Bachrach et al., 1990; Simon & Altstein, 2000; U.S. State Department, 2001). I would like to emphasize, that given the hxstory of transracial/transnational adoption, Korean adoption and

adoptees still dominate most adoption-related conversations. It is important to recognize that more research is warranted to further disaggregate Asian transracial/transnational adoptions.

The Model Minority Myth

Though Asian transracial adoptees are often perceived and treated by others as being racially white and ethnically European, they are still people of color and often further marginalized because they are Asian American. The model minority myth is arguably the most prevalent racial stereotypes in the Asian American community. It aggregates Asian Americans as a monolithic group of people who achieve universal and unparalleled academic and occupational success (Li & Wang, 2008; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007, Suzuki 1977, 2002; Uyematsu, 1971; Yu, 2006). Museus and Kiang (2009) argue that the invisibility of research about Asian Americans in higher education can be attributed to the model minority myth and proposed five misconceptions that are commonly held about Asian American students and the model minority myth: (1) Asian American students are a monolithic group, (2) they are not considered racial or ethnic minorities, (3) Asian Americans do not encounter significant challenges attributable to race, (4) they do not seek or require addition resources and support, and (5) Asian Americans consider degree consider completing their degree equating to success.

The term model minority was coined in 1966 and was first used in a *New York Times* article, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," written by a University of California Berkeley sociologist, William Petersen, who praised Japanese Americans for their own personal successes that were an unaided effort (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015); every barrier they encountered resulted in enhancing their determination to succeed (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). The model minority myth and the failure of further disaggregating data among the Asian American community contributes to the invisibility and dismissal of issues that affect Asian American

students on college campuses, such as mental health and ethnic disparities in attaining a degree (Museus & Chang, 2009). The aforementioned are just some of many reasons why Chang (2008) suggests that Asian American students are one of the most misunderstood populations of students on college campuses. Furthermore, many scholars and practitioners in the field do not feel there is a need for scholarship and research on Asian Americans because of the stereotype of Asian Americans being a successful, problem-free, and "high-achieving" group of students (Museus, 2013). Consequently, researchers are spending additional time and energy justifying their research on Asian Americans (Museus, 2009), and as a result, there is an omission of Asian Americans from higher education research and discourse (Chang, 2008). And although this stereotype can be seemingly positive, it is indeed problematic, harmful, and form of racism in itself.

As several of the authors have emphasized, the model minority myth can be used to dismiss the role of race and racism in creating challenges for students of color (Museus, 2013) and these "positive" expectations further complicate the racial context in which Asian American students develop and make-meaning with their identities. However, the model minority myth is often defined solely as a stereotype about Asian Americans, which does not recognize the implications for discipling and shaming other people of color (Poon, et al., 2016). In not acknowledging this, it deflects attention away from how this myth is a fundamental part of maintaining white supremacy (Poon, et al., 2016). It is vital that scholars and researcher's engage in critical reflection of the purpose the model minority myth serves and how we can counter it (Poon, et al., 2016). There must also be intentionality, solidarity, and resistance when discussing the implications of the model minority myth and the experiences and perspectives of race and racism within higher education (Poon, et al., 2016). This will help in moving the Asian

Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) narrative in the public discourse in a more humanizing way (Poon, et al., 2016).

Model-Model Minorities

> *I began to observe the ways in which Asian Pacific Islander Desi Americans are consistently excluded within institutions, and how white people and even other people of color do not believe we struggle or experience racism in the same ways or to the degree as other marginalized groups. I worked with a group of student leaders from the various cultural centers to form a coalition of marginalized students. For many of the Asian American students, this was their first experience engaging in social and racial justice activism. Given the longstanding hxstory of Asian Americans being excluded and silenced, it was intimidating for many students to be engaging in this type of work. For the first time, we were stepping outside these lines and breaking down barriers and stereotypes about the community. We were told that we were not doing "enough." When we did speak-up, we were often dismissed. We ultimately decided to disengage from the coalition because we felt our voices and experiences did not matter and were not as "relevant" as other groups. –Hannah Hyun White*

Transracial adoptees blur a line between race, ethnicity, and culture—working through a space that is somewhere in between how they identify themselves and how others perceive them. Transracial adoptees are minorities in society, yet recognized and treated by others, as if they are racially white and ethnically European (Lee, 2001). On one side, they are still marginalized/oppressed and seen as inferior to the dominant white race in society; however, they are often treated and perceived by their peers as being white and a part of the majority culture.

While Asian American student population does not fit into the model minority myth stereotype that is pervasive in numerous institutions and college campuses, looking at Asian Americans that also identify as transracial adoptees (specifically raised by white parents), it further complicates these types of discussions. For these reasons, I propose that Asian American

transracial adoptees can be perceived and treated as "model-model" minorities. I use this undefined term to describe the struggle Asian American transracial adoptees might experience in making-meaning with their own racial identities in relation to whiteness and the pressure to racially assimilate. The first "model" describes the arguably most infamous stereotype in the Asian American community, as discussed above. I use the second "model" to describe the white families in which Asian American TRA's are raised by in the pressure these adoptees may feel to racially assimilate to the dominate white culture and the privileges and immunity they may benefit from because of the white families they have been raised by. This can be a complex idea for Asian American transracial adoptees because they are sitting between two worlds; they are perceived as model minorities and other racial groups believing they do not experience racism and are often seen as "honorary white people," but at the same time also being seen as white or often navigating the world as if they are white, while identifying as a person of color.[4]

I seek to acknowledge these complexities, while also incorporating and exploring the effects and realities that racial passing, colorblindness, and racial visibility has on Asian American transracial adoptees engaging in activism and advocacy work and in navigating their own racial identities. And in addition, how these realities contribute to the racialization and treatment Asian American TRA's by their peers in choosing to engage in this type of activism and often times having to choose to claim one or both racial and ethnic identities in order to cope with socially enforced visibility/invisibility of being an Asian American transracial adoptee.

[4] Nicole Chung (2019) describes these complexities in her book "All You Can Ever Know." In a recent article published by The Guardian, she describes how her understanding of whiteness is instinctive because of the white circles she moved in as a child, and how she had to adapt to make herself more palatable to white folx.

Dancing With Racial Identities

As Palmer (2011) explains, dancing with a white cultural identity is a time when Korean adoptees are pacified into a state of denial and disempowerment with it comes to their racial and transracial adoptee identities. They grow up within the "status quo" of their culturally white-informed families and communities (Palmer, 2011) which only further encourages assimilation, colorblindness, dismissal, and silence around race, racism, and white privilege. Cultural racism leads most adoptees to believe they cannot be both white and a person of color (Palmer, 2011). In many ways, adoptees are forced to choose between these identities. According to Palmer (2011), many adoptees choose to identify with their white cultural identity because they feel they are not "Korean enough" and Korean culture is only for "authentic" Koreans. Palmer (2011) also describes how many adoptees go through an "awoke" phase where they have self-realization that they are not white, and although others might perceive and often treat them as being a part of the dominant culture, the reality is the world will never treat them as such. Consequently, adoptees will then attempt to incorporate their Korean culture into their everyday lives. In doing so, adoptees believe that matching their race with their culture will allow them to establish an attachment with their racial identities (Palmer, 2011).

Most adoptees have considered their transracial adoptee identity at some point in their life (Palmer, 2011). Thus, it is important that we begin to understand how they have navigated significant aspects of their identities. Several adoptees begin to explore their transracial adoptee identity by engaging themselves in TRA adoptee communities (Palmer, 2011). This can be seen in the form of social media groups, cultural camps, mentoring, volunteering, etc. While community is important, it is also worth noting that many transracial adoptees grow up feeling completely alone (Palmer, 2011). TRA's do not fully fit in with their white families, peers, and

communities because they are Asian, and they do not fit in with their Asian communities because they have grown up culturally white (Palmer, 2011). In one of the studies Palmer (2011) conducted, the transracial adoptees were able to build relationships, yet they also believed some of the most important people in their lives could never fully understanding what it means to be a transracial adoptee – culturally white, and racially Asian.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

"Our activism allows us to find kinship with other TRA's and we work for each other to develop our political consciousness and provide a platform for agency which helps us develop our concept of identity which could not have otherwise been done." -Jeon

Asian American transracial identity development is complex for reasons including the prevalence of the model (-model) minority myth, the interplay between the racialization and treatment by non-Asian American TRA peers while engaging in activism and advocacy work, and a lack of understanding and knowledge around the varying aspects of Asian American transracial adoptee identity development. In addition, there are also currently no faculty in the higher education field conducting research on the transracial adoptee community and most literature on this population does not exist outside the field of education (Museus, 2014). Research and scholarship that examines identities challenges and experiences encountered by transracial adoptees in postsecondary education is also nearly non-existent (Museus, 2014). In the context of engagement in activism, this is problematic because Asian American transracial adoptees are often treated and perceived by their peers (both white and students of color) as white and are often excluded or dismissed from participating in activism and advocacy work and are omitted from conversations and scholarship completely when it comes racial identity development. Given how these students might be externally identified and "outed" by their peers

in the dialogues, it is important to understand how Asian American TRA's experience engagement in racial justice activism and make sense of their own racial identities. Thus, the proposed study seeks to identify the ways in which Asian American undergraduate students that are internationally adopted and raised by white families engage in advocacy work around race and racism, and how they find their own empowerment with their racial identities. This study will address the following guiding research question: **how does engaging in activism and advocacy work support Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees in making meaning of their racial identities?**

Significance of Study

Research on Asian American students and their experiences is largely absent from present-day literature. Moreover, scholarship and literature on transracial adoptees is nearly non-existent. In a review of the five most widely read peer-reviewed academic journals in higher education, including *The Journal of Higher Education, Research in Higher Education, The Review of Higher Education, The Journal of College Student Development,* and the *NASPA Journal,* Museus (2009) found that about 1% of the articles published within the last ten years gave exclusive attention to Asian Americans. In this section I will explore in which this study is significant: by adding to the (non)existing body of scholarship and literature on Asian American students and transracial adoptees, on the consequences of racialization and stereotypes on Asian American transracial adoptee students, and the complexity of racial identity, and experiences in engaging in activism and advocacy work.

Chang (2008) argues that Asian American students are one of the most misunderstood populations of students on college campuses, largely due to the absence of literature and

research in higher education. As institutions are becoming increasingly diverse, there is also need for a deeper, more complex understanding of student population increase (Museus & Chang, 2009). A goal of this study is to further the understanding of how Asian American transracial adoptee students and their experiences with activism and advocacy work are related and interconnected to their racial identity development. This understanding is important in knowing how to support these students navigate institutional environments and resources and creating intentional spaces and transforming current places to incorporate both Asian American and transracial adoptee voices and narratives.

Exploring racial identity experiences of Asian American transracial adoptee students will underscore the detriments of the model (-model) minority myth. Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) challenged the model minority myth in education after discovering the different levels of educational achievement among Asian American students. They argued that monolithic views about Asian American student successes are detrimental to understanding this student population because Asian Americans are aggregated into one encompassing Asian American label (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). The authors further urged for more research on Asian American students, specifically exploring the insights of the role of race in educational settings to examine the experiences of Asian American students in higher education (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). This understanding is crucial to avoid essentializing these students in a way that perpetuates an Othering discourse (Mac, 2011). In addition to adding to the body of literature on Asian American students, this study will explore the complexities of racial identity experiences and can potentially highlight the role of racial identity plays in the lives of Asian American students as they are perceived and treated by their peers and others.

Asian American transracial adoptees are an invisible population and also misunderstood as part of the Asian American population in postsecondary education research and discourse (Museus, 2014). Research that examines the identities, challenges, and experiences confronted by Asian American TRA's and how they navigate postsecondary education is virtually nonexistent (Museus, 2014). Museus (2014) asserts that it is essential that higher education scholars begin expanding knowledge on this community of students. This study will not only add to the non-existent scholarship and research on transracial adoptees but will explore the challenges and experiences of Asian American TRA's engaging in activism and advocacy work and the affects it has on how these students contextualize their own racial identities.

Asian Americans have a history of engaging in activism that fights for racial justice and social change, which will be discussed in the next chapter; there is still a body of literature surrounding this topic that is missing. Moreover, from my current understanding and research, there is no literature or research that currently exists on transracial adoptees engaging in activism and advocacy work. This study will contribute to the scholarship surrounding the Asian American and transracial adoptee community in bringing awareness to this invisible community of students in highlighting the experiences and complexities of engaging in activism and advocacy work.

Definition of Important Terms

Asian American

There are several terminologies used as reference to *Asian Americans.* This includes Asian American (AA), Asian Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI), Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

(AANHPI), and more commonly now (in order to encompass all Asian American identities), Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA). *Asian American* is both a racial category and sociopolitical identity. As a racial category, this term is defined as descendants of immigrants from any part of Asia or are Asian immigrants themselves to the United States (Liu, Murakami, Eap, & Hall, 2009).

Asian American is a pan-ethnic term that allows members of the group to build solidarity in order to fight oppression and demand rights and resources (Chang & Kwan, 2009). For the purposes of this study, I will use the term *Asian American* as defined by Liu et al. (2009). I acknowledge that using this pan-ethnic term may not accurately represent the diversity of Asian American populations and that specific ethnic groups within the Asian American community still dominate conversations, research, and scholarship. I am intentionally choosing to exclude Pacific Islanders from this term because of their distinct and unique racial experiences within the United States. While I have predefined the term *Asian American* for the purposes of this research proposal and study, I recognize that this definition may change as the study progresses and my participants define for themselves what Asian American means.

Transracial/Transnational Adoption/Adoptee

Rachel Dolezal made headlines when she claimed she was a transracial person. Born white, Dolezal said she felt her true race was African American. This phenomenon of whites claiming a transracial identity is becoming more prevalent, as we have seen in mainstreamed news. The misuse of the term transracial undermines this community of people. The misuse of the term “transracial” has also been found problematic by those in the transracial adoptee

community, which was coined as a term since at least the 1970s, if not earlier (Simon & Alstein, 1977).

A transracial adoptee is simply defined as, "an individual who is adopted into a family with race(s) that is different from the one(s) given from their birth parents) (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). Most commonly, the adoptee is a person of color and the family is white, but it does not necessarily have to be this case. *Transnational adoption* is also known as international adoption and can be loosely defined as adopting an individual from a different country other than the one currently resided in. It is important to note, that an adoptee can be transracial, but not transnational, and also transnational, but not transracial. For the purposes of this study, I am consciously choosing to engage in conversations with specifically Asian American transracial *and* transnational adoptees. I am choosing to define these individuals as Asian American adoptees born in any part of Asia and adopted and raised by at least one white family member in the United States. I recognize that in choosing to focus on Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees, it does not encompass the entire adoptee experience.

Racial Identity/Racial Identity Development

Racial identity and *racial identity development* are terms that are indistinguishably linked and are often confused with each other. The term *racial identity* refers to an individual's sense of collective identity based on the person's perception that they share a common heritage with a specific racial group (Helms, 1993). On the other hand, *racial identity development* refers to the process in which individuals of various social identity groups are able to overcome internalized racism to achieve a self-affirming group identity (Helms & Cook, 2005). To put it briefly, *racial identity* describes the content of the identity

and *racial identity development* describes the process by which the content changes (Mac, 2011).

Activism

Activism can be seen as intentional actions to bring about social, political, and racial change. From my own experiences in engaging in this type of work, often times people associate activism with demonstrations and protests; but in fact, activism can take on many different forms. While demonstrations and protests are a component of activism, I often have felt that if an individual is not visibly "doing something," it is not seen as a form of activism. Activism for me can not only be demonstrations, but also reading books and articles to further educate oneself, presenting and engaging in scholarship and research, attending forums and discussions, etc. Activism takes on many distinctive forms and looks different for each individual. With that being said, for the purposes of this study, I am choosing to let my participants define activism and self-identify themselves as activists. While I may have my own ideas of what activism is and looks like, I know that my own implicit notions of activism may change as this study progresses and my participants share and define for themselves what activism is and what it means for them to be an activist.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Overview of Asian American Identity Development Models

Racial and ethnic identity development is an aspect of an individual's self-concept that is based on how someone defines oneself in relation to specific racial or ethnic groups (Museus, 2014). The number of Asian American students continuously growing on college campuses;

however, given the dominant narrative and misconceptions surrounding this Asian American community (I.e. model minority myth), there is still a deficiency in theoretical and conceptual frameworks that provide an authentic understanding of Asian American identity development.

Several different Asian American identity development models have been proposed, with some of the earlier models utilizing linear stages. J. Kim's (1981) Asian American Student Identity Development model was the first Asian American identity development model developed based on research that looked at the experiences of Japanese American womxn. Kim's model has aided in understanding how Asian Americans experience and internalize racism, how it affects their racial identity development, and how the needs, challenges and support will look different from other racial/ethnic groups. There is an emphasis on racial identity to highlight the social and psychological consequences of being racially marginalized in the United States (Kim, 2012) and more specifically, how their racial membership impacts Asian Americans coming into their own with their racial identity and work through racial conflicts in the white dominant society (Kim, 2012). Kim's model describes the progression of the developmental process through five stages:

1. *Ethnic Awareness* refers to an individual identity is seen through the influence of their families. The amount of exposure to Asian heritage also contributes to the individual's view toward their ethnic roots.
2. *White identification* occurs when individuals are exposed to racial prejudices usually through school systems and their peers. Consequently, the individual may attempt to dissociate from their Asian American identity.
3. *Awakening to social political consciousness* indicates an increased awareness of racial oppression and their political consciousness. The individual recognizes that they are a

racial minority and the self-concept of being Asian American shifts to being more positive.

4. *Redirection to Asian American consciousness* signifies that individuals embrace their Asian American heritage and culture and their sense of self-pride. There is also a development of anger towards the white population because of the realization that white oppression was a cause of their negative experiences growing-up.
5. *Incorporation* is the final stage Kim's model where individuals learn to balance their own identity and appreciate others. As a result, identification with or against white culture is no longer a critical issue or consideration.

Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee (2002) have also contributed to this understanding in underscoring the importance of acknowledging the ways that dominant cultures and traditional Asian cultural values interact to influence Asian American identity. In addition, Accapadi's (2012) Point of Entry (POE) Model contributes to the discussion about Asian American identity and consciousnesses and promotes a reconsideration in which scholars and practitioners are conceptualizing identity development processes. The POE Model proposes that four environmental factors constitute points of entry into an Asian American identity journey:

1. *Immigration hxstories,* and the proximity to these hxstories, is a factor that shapes Asian American consciousness. For some first-generation immigrants, there is an attachment of "going back home," which naturally leads to detachment of engaging in the American experience. As a result, encounters with racist experiences are likely internalized as the perpetual foreigner myth. On the contrary, for second or other generations of immigrants, their experiences with racism can be internalized completely different and result in a different perspective on Asian American identity.

2. *Ethnic attachment* refers to the idea that Asian Americans' attachment to their ethnic identity (e.g. language and culture), impacts an individual's Asian American consciousness. An individual's ethnic attachment might incite identification with a pan-Asian American identity or discourage one from identifying as Asian American.
3. *Familial influences* are the third environmental factor in the POE Model. It includes the ways that families send messages to Asian Americans that form their sense of self. Consequently, individuals internalize these messages and it affects how they choose to identify.
4. *External influences* are characterized by the environmental racial realities, incorporating racism and racial climates, of Asian Americans' lives. For example, because Asian Americans have been targets of increasing race-related violence, they inevitably must confront their racialized identity. These external influences also often play a vital role in racial identity exploration because these factors cause a loss of innocence and eliminate an individual's acceptance in a color-blind society.

In addition, Accapadi (2012) outlines two individual factors that also contribute to shaping Asian American consciousness:

1. *Self as other* (physical appearance) can explain an individual's Asian American race-consciousness. Individuals are forced to work through the ways in which people within their environment categorize and treat them as a consequence of their phenotypic features. There have been studies that explore how Asian American womxn have internalized white standards of beauty as being the universal standard. As a result, this internalized racism forces individuals to interact with their racial identity.

2. *Other social identities* (e.g. class, gender, sexual orientation, ability) also provides a point of entry for Asian American consciousness. Individuals interact with racial and ethnic elements to commonly shape Asian Americans' experiences and (re)shape their worldviews and sense of self. For example, the intersections of racial identity and sexual orientation for non-binary Asian Americans can leave these individuals dually marginalized; it often forces them to choose between identities (Kumashiro, 1999; Li & Orleans, 2001).

The POE Model reflects on the particular factors that initiate Asian American identity development, instead of collectively grouping individuals and maintaining they all follow a specific path. Moreover, it focuses on a lens that is intended at understanding the numerous catalysts of identity development and accounted for the contextual, complex, and multidimensional natures of Asian American identity processes.

Contrary to previous models that have concentrated on the type of transitions students might go through, all of these models have highlighted the significance of contextual factors and the understanding of how these factors (e.g. oppression, historical contexts, home cultures, immigration) shape identity in Asian American students. It provides a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Asian American students and how we can continue to analyze the systems of dominance and oppression that disadvantage Asian American communities.

Limitations of Current Discourse and Themes

Researchers and scholars have contributed valuable frameworks for understanding identity development in the Asian American population, though there are still limitations surrounding these bases and conversations. While these various identity development models do recognize the significance of context, they do not center on the context. For example, it is argued

that these models are based on the assumption that Asian American grow up working through multiple cultures (Museus, 2014). As a result, Asian American identity models only partially explain how these contexts shape Asian Americans' identity and sense of self. By focusing on the individual, it can hinder the development of a more holistic understanding of how context shapes identity.

Experiences in college are also shaped by the social identities of Asian Americans. These social identities can include gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, immigration status, adoption, and religion. Often times in conversations around Asian American identity development, educators view it as a unidimensional racial identity (Museus 2014). The intersectionality of these social identities is often not the focus of discussions surrounding Asian American identity development. In addition, several of the existing Asian American identity models frame identity development through a progression of stages. With the experience's students navigate, there is evidence that Asian American identity is not fixed and is constantly changing (Wong, 2013). It is important to account for the environmental contexts, relationships, interactions, and assumptions that can potentially influence Asian American students in shaping and defining their own identities (Museus, 2014).

Finally, the intersectionality of these social identities and the associations made with them, mutually shape Asian Americans' complex racial, cultural, and ethnic identities (Museus, 2014). Examining how race, culture, and ethnicity intersect is complicated. All three are interconnected and are a vital aspect in Asian American identity development. In some of the Asian American identity models, some are focused on race while others are focused more on culture and ethnicity (Museus, 2014). As a result, race, culture, and ethnicity, are often discussed

as occurring in separate stages. This further perpetuates the assumptions that race, ethnicity, or culture are seen as distinct processes and impede our understanding how they might interrelate.

Transracial Adoptee Identity Development

In looking at the current literature, there are two particular pieces that have caught the attention of numerous higher education scholars and practitioners, as they begin to explore identity development in college student TRAs. It noteworthy to recognize that these two studies specifically focus on the experiences of Asian American TRAs and does not encompass the experiences of all transracial adoptees.

In Hoffman and Peña's (2013) article, "Too Korean To Be White and Too White To Be Korean: Ethnic Identity Development Among Transracial Korean American Adoptees," they explore how lived experiences affect ethnic identity development of transracial Korean American adoptees and how their journey informed their experiences in pursuing a college degree. One finding Hoffman and Peña (2013) emphasize is that many of the policy and practice decisions made by professionals in higher education are based on the concept that students learn and develop in certain predictable ways and colleges and universities have the responsibility to create environments that nurture this development. The problem with this notion is that TRA's are not recognized by these college student populations, and although certain racial identity development theories can offer some insight and guidance in supporting this community, there is still a larger picture missing.

In Suda and Hartlep's (2016) article, "Balancing Two Worlds. Supporting Transracially Adopted Asian/American Students on the College Campus," they address the idea of balancing two worlds of their adoptive parents and biological parent's culture. More

specifically, their article aims to answer two driving question: (a) What are the challenges faced by the lived experiences transracially adopted Asian/American college students? And (b) In what ways can colleges support this population? (pg. 57). A common theme that emerged in their findings was that transracial adoptee college students were forced to deal with society perceptions of them. They appeared monoracial but identified in a more complex multiracial way (identities form their birth parents and adoptive parents). Some suggested that being a transracial adoptee involves choosing an identity based on the situation or the environment one is in. Finally, in balancing two worlds of being a TRA, many participants in this study believed the challenges they faced on their college campus were related to the lack of institutional support for understanding this marginalized population, especially being Asian American.

Multiracial Students and Transracial Adoptee Identity Development

The development of multiracial students is most comparable to that of transracial adoptees. In addition, TRA's and multiracial students are often aggregated together because their experiences are recognized as being similar. For example, NASPA's Multiracial Knowledge Community (MRKC) recognizes transracial adoptees as part of their community. While this is a fantastic first-step in creating visibility for TRA's, it is vital to recognize that the experiences of multiracial students and TRA's is vastly different, and ought to be recognized as such. Acknowledging all aspects of this and because there is no current theory that exists to explain the experiences of transracial adoptee students, Renn's Ecological Theory of Mixed-Race Identity Development was utilized in this study as a foundation to inform the development of transracial adoptee students.

Kristen Renn conducted three studies examining both the identity development process and outcomes experienced by mixed race college students of various racial/ethnic backgrounds, creating an ecological model of mixed-race identity (Patton, 2016). The study revealed the importance of space and peer culture in multiracial identity development. Participants chose numerous ways of identifying racially depending on the context of the situation. Renn described five fluid nonexclusive identity patterns. (1) Monoracial identity. In this pattern if one parent was white, the identity commonly chosen represented their non-dominant heritage. Claiming a monoracial identity was simplest for students whose appearance and cultural knowledge were consistent with that identity. However, once in college, peer microsystems affected the degree to which students could easily claim a monoracial identity and be accepted. (2) Multiple monoracial identity. This pattern represents their parental cultures. Students demonstrated they were equally knowledgeable about each aspect of their culture or sought to learn more in college. They also demonstrated a strong desire to label themselves rather than be labeled by others. (3) Multiracial identity. In this pattern, students saw themselves beyond the monoracial paradigm and sharing common experiences with other mixed-race students regardless of ethnicity. Being exposed to the racial identity issues in educational settings also contributed to stratification of identity. (4) Extraracial. Many students saw that race is a social construction rather than a biological reality and either opted out of racial categorization or did not adhere to the categories used in the United States. (5) Situational Identity. In this last pattern, students considered a racial identification fluid and contextually driven. Shifting among identities was sometimes unconscious and other times intentional and this process was easy for some students, but stressful for others. The rigidity of racial boundaries on campus was a contributing factor. Renn argued that rather than being problematic, as stage theories would suggest, “The ability to read contexts and construct identity

in relation to specific contexts is a highly evolved skill requiring emotional maturity and cognitive complexity" (pg. 80)

Specifically looking at the impact of college, Renn saw it was a particularly challenging time for multiracial students. There was a drastic transition for mixed-race students in that they leave the direct influence of their families and enter an environment in which peer interactions and community become vital. Cultural legitimacy and loyalty are also key factors in acceptance and greatly influence identity development. For example, Brown (2001) builds of Renn's work and found that since Black and white multiracial participants were not given a choice to identify as multiracial on application forms and indicated that they were Black, they were recruited into Black organizations. Many found a home, but others felt pushed to be something they were not and to choose between Black and white cultures. In addition, if a student's appearance, name, or language does not reflect their ethnic identity, students may have a difficult time being accepted by their peers in monoracial groups of color. At the same time multiracial students are perceived by whites to be "of color" and are excluded from these groups. The degree of fluency that mixed-race students have with their racial/ethnic cultures greatly impacts the extent to which they are accepted by and see themselves as belonging to groups that reflect their background.

Nature vs. Nurture

While Renn's (2004) Ecological Theory of Mixed-Race Identity Development can inform some of the experiences of transracial adoptees, Hartlep and Suda (forthcoming) have adapted Renn's theory to help describe how transracial adoptees develop a mixed-race identity through nature and nurture influences. When considering Renn's (2004) theory, majority of it can only be applied to adoptees that have influences from their birth parents (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). The identity model Hartlep and Suda (forthcoming) have developed is based on a

scale of nature vs. nurture paired with the influences that both birth and adoptive parents can have on an adoptee's racial identity development. It is important to note that this is not a stage model but rather a fluid model that shows identity processes can change at any given time (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). Some of the categories and their respective identity patterns are summarized below:

- Biological Identities (Influenced by Nature): Frequently, the adoptee will know little to no information regarding their birth families hxstory. Research suggest it is natural for adopted individuals to question their roots and want to pursue a search to find information about this "unknown self" in an effort to resolve the break in the continuity of their lives (Suda and Hartlep, forthcoming). Identifying with a biological identity can cause concern with adoptive parents because some adoptees may dis-identify with their adoptive parents because they feel a closer connection to the culture of their birthland (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). However, at the same time, the adoptee may be trying to understand more than their birth heritage (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).
    - *Birth Monoracial Identity:* a person with this identity will align with one racial identity given by their birth parents; individuals will typically align with a race that is most salient to them and associated with their physical appearance (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).
    - *Birth Multiple Monoracial Identity:* A person in this identity process is conscious of more than one racial identity given from their birth parents (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). This will likely show up with a transracial adoptee that had multiracial birth parents (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).

- Adoptee Identities (Influenced by Nurture): Environmental experiences that a child is exposed to play an integral role in their development (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). It is entirely possible that an adopted child will know little or nothing about their birth roots and heritage and may find it easier to identify with their adoptive parents' identities (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).
    - *Adoptive Monoracial Identity:* a person in this identity process will align with one racial identity given by their birth parents (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). This identity will come easily to individuals who look similar to their adoptive parents (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).
    - *Adoptive Multiple Monoracial Identity:* a person in this identity process will be conscious of more than one racial identity because of their adoptive parents. They will typically align to racial identities associated with their parents (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).

This model serves as a way to consider both the nurture and nature influences on a student and their racial environment (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming). However, transracial adoption adds another layer to a person's racial identity development and there is no transparent way to for a person to develop with all of the possibilities and considerations for the adoptee's upbringing (Hartlep and Suda, forthcoming).

Background and Emergence of Asian American Activism

Social and political movements on college and university campuses emerged from the long-standing history of institutional traditions that perpetuated and promoted beliefs, ideologies, and practices that alienated and marginalized the existence and experiences of racial, ethnic, gender, and class minorities (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Despite the changes happening in the

diversity of college campuses, racial and ethnic marginalized students continue to experience and express blatant racial violence in their higher education experiences. The Civil Rights Movement served as a presentation of a movement toward social justice and equity for people of color, but many of these marginalized communities found it insufficient in advancing the needs of their own communities (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Consequently, Blacks, Asians, and Latinx development their respective movements that were grounded in addressing the challenges pertaining to race and equity in their own communities (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015).

Activism in the Asian American community and the Asian American Movement worked with all communities of color, but it specifically drew its energy form Black Power ideology (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). The Black Power Movement caused many Asian Americans to begin to question themselves in regard to self-identity and liberating all people of color (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). During this time, the public perception of Asian Americans was largely influenced by the model minority myth and the growing pan-ethnic Asian community from the Immigration Act of 1965 (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). The model minority myth only further perpetuated the denial of challenges of Asian Americans and justified criticism on Blacks and African Americans (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Participation in the Asian American Movement was an opportunity to counter and take back the narratives that emphasized a false idea of civil solidarity and self-achieving success (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). The language and inspiration to identify and disempower sources of institutionalized power came from the Black Power Movement (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). For many Asian Americans, this gave them a way to mend social tensions caused by the model minority myth and unify with other communities of color through recognition of shared oppression and the act of self-acceptance (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Inspired by the actions of folx affiliated with the Black Power Movement, and

with a deeper pride in racial identity, Asian American students also began to reconsider their position within the racial hierarchy perpetuated by the model minority myth and question their liberation in the United States (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Moreover, the "Black is Beautiful" cultural movement brought a new awareness to Asian Americans and instilled a sense of pride and ownership of their physical and cultural heritages (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). It is with this, that the Asian American Movement and the demand for racial equality, visibility, and representation, took its place within the larger context of the Civil Rights Movement; Asian Americans were no longer complacent with sitting on the sideline of the Black-White struggle (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015).

The presence of the Civil Rights Movement on college campuses made it impossible to avoid discussions on issues of race, racism, and identity politics (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). The Asian American Movement seemed to be a defining point for many individuals in defining their ow racial, social, and political needs and narratives. With the progression of this movement, it also resulted in new fields of study; one of them being ethnic studies. Asian American studies served as a discipline that offered students the opportunity to critically in engage in literature and history central to the Asian American community (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). It was an opportunity to amplify the often-silent voices of Asian Americans and reframe and redefine the dominant narratives that contributed to the perceptions of Asian Americans as model minorities. It was through these spaces that students developed their racial and ethnic pride and proposed alternative frameworks for students to move beyond the confines and boundaries of college campuses and into organization within the community (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015).

Chapter III: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Race Theory and AsianCrit

While there is no current theory that exists to explain the experiences of transracial adoptee students, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has gained a significant amount of exposure in higher education curriculum and has been utilized as a conceptual lens to examine how dominant systems of racial oppression impact the lives of Asian Americans and other people of color (Museus, 2014). CRT, specifically Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) can be utilized as a foundation to inform the development of Asian American transracial adoptee students and their engagement in activism and advocacy work. For instance, AsianCrit can serve as a tool to help reenter conversations about transracial adoptee identity and how the complexities of identity development processes can impact how Asian American TRA's engage in activism and advocacy work.

CRT is a critical theoretical framework that initially developed in the field of legal studies in the 1970s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT was created by critical legal scholars in response to the unwillingness of the legal field to implicitly critique and respond to the role of race and racism in the legal field and amplifying the voices of people of color who experience racism within legal institutions (Museus, 2014). To put it simply, CRT emerged as a consequence of a racist legal system and challenges dominant systematic oppression towards people of color (Museus, 2014).

Building on the work of Critical Race Theory and Asian American Studies scholars, Museus and Iftikar (2013) proposed an Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) framework that is encompassed in seven interconnected tenets that propose a lens to understand how race and racial oppression function within societies that are built on fundaments of White Supremacy:

1. *Asianization* refers to the explicit ways in which White Supremacy, and the nativistic racism that proceeds from it, shape the racialization of Asian Americans as perpetual and threatening foreigners, model minorities, and sexually abnormal emasculated men and hypersexualized womxn (Chew, 1994; Cho, 2003; Chon, 1995; Espiritu, 1993; Lowe, 1996; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Prasso, 2005). This racial Asianization is a common use of racism in which society racially oppresses Asian American.

2. *Transnational contexts* emphasize the importance of understanding how transnational imperialism, colonization, racism, and other forms of oppression shape global and national policies and structures, and these frameworks influence the lives of Asian Americans (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

3. *(Re)constructive hxstory* highlights the reality the universal exclusion of Asian Americans in American hxstory (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). It centers the need to surpass this invisibility and silence toward further developing a collective Asian American historical narrative and to (re)examine existing narratives in order to amplify the voices and roles of Asian Americans in those hxstories (e.g., Chan, 1991; Takaki, 1998; Tamura, 2001, 2003; Umemoto, 1989).

4. Strategic (anti)essentialism refers to how Asian American communities recognize and resist the ways in which White Supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolithic racial group, while underscoring that Asian Americans also have some agency in resisting and shaping racialization practices (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

5. *Intersectionality* is the idea that White Supremacy and other systems of oppression (e.g., heterosexism, ableism, etc.) reciprocally shape the societal contexts in which Asian Americans exist and their lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1993). Consequently, these systematic intersections

of racial identities and other social identities (gender sexual orientation, class) mutually shape Asian Americans and their experiences (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

6. *Story, theory, and praxis* highlights the idea that counterrstories, theoretical framework, and practice are significant inextricably intertwined elements in analyzing the experiences of Asian Americans and advocacy for Asian American people and communities (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Building on the work of other CRT scholars, Asian American stories inform theory and practice to facilitate positive individual and social transformation (Brayboy, 2005; Delgado, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Story, theory, and praxis also recognizes the notion that the vices of people of color and work of other scholars of color have been historically marginalized in academia (Delgado, 1984, 1992). AsianCrit resists imperialism and centers the voices of Asian Americans and the work of other Asian American scholars (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

7. *Commitment to social justice* highlights the assumption that AsianCrit is aimed at eliminating all forms of oppression and exploitation, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalist exploitation, and other systems of domination (Museus & Iftikar, 2014).

An AsianCrit perspective might be utilized to stimulate new questions and understandings regarding how systemic perspectives and intergroup relations might shape Asian American transracial adoptee students and their engagement in activism and advocacy work, the complexity of this advocacy and work, and the role that Asian American transracial adoptee stories might contribute in development Asian American transracial adoptee agency and empowerment.]

Chapter IV: Methodology and Methods

The purpose of this study is to explore how Asian American transracial adoptees make sense of their racial identities while engaging in activism and advocacy work. This study addresses the following guiding research question: how does engaging in activism and advocacy work support Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees in making meaning of their racial identities? In this chapter, I describe the qualitative approach I will use to conduct my study. I hope to achieve the following goals in this chapter: 1) provide an overview of phenomenology, including key concepts prevalent to understanding this methodology, and why I chose this approach, (2) share who I am as a researcher, (3) position my role and background in relation to the topic of interest, (4) discuss my data collection, data analysis, and interpretation methods, (5) introduce how I propose to present my findings in the following chapter.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

I chose to use qualitative research methods to conduct this study because qualitative research encompasses the subjective perspectives of the researcher and the participant including, race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the process of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Qualitative research approaches the world with a multicultural process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), enabling the researcher to situate themselves through a set of interpretive practices that amplify the visibility of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The qualitative interpretation is seen through a series of field notes, interviews, conversations, recordings, and personal reflections.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that qualitative research requires an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world, allowing qualitative researchers to study their personal interests in the participants natural setting and attempt to make meaning of the phenomena based on what the participant offers. Participants often offer stories about what they did and why in regard to the area of interest (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Qualitative research methods are appropriate for the driving question in my study due to my interest in emphasizing the voices and stories of Asian American transracial adoptee students, their experiences of engaging in activism and advocacy work, and making sense of their racial identities. Utilizing this approach, the subjective views and experiences of participants are valued and embraced (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Specifically, I chose to use phenomenological study because this approach describes the meaning of several individuals and their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2002).

Phenomenology

I am researching a phenomenon that I have lived. As a proud Asian American transracial adoptee womxn student, I have actively experienced and participated in activism and advocacy work during my time at a predominantly white institution (PWI). My undergraduate years and the engagement in this work significantly impacted my identity development and how I navigate the world in which I live in based on my identity and active choice to engage in activism and advocacy work. It is because of my own truth that I walk in and the stories I have live every single day that fuel my passion and curiosity to amplify the voices and the lived experiences of other Asian American transracial adoptees in a phenomenological manner.

Phenomenology allows the research to hone in on their passion while acknowledging their fundamental role during the research process (Mobley, 2015). This type of study is unafraid to underscore the aspects of our lives that are often excluded and dismissed, and specifically the background assumptions that we all bring as we try to better understand a specific phenomenon (Moran, 2000). Moreover, as Mobley (2015) asserts, phenomenological research is always a study of someone: a real, tangible person, who seeks to solicit individual, historical, and life situations in in order to make meaning of a certain aspect of human existence (van Manen, 2007).

Types of Phenomenology

There are two types of phenomenology Creswell (2002) highlights: hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) and empirical, transcendental, or physiological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (1990) describes hermeneutical phenomenology as research oriented toward lived experiences (phenomenology) and interpreting the "texts" of life (hermeneutics) (p. 4). He discusses phenomenology research as a dynamic interplay among six research activities (Creswell, 2002). First, researchers turn to a phenomenon or an "abiding concern" (van Manen, 1990, p. 31) that interests them. During the process, the researcher reflects on essential themes, or what establishes the nature of this lived experience (Creswell, 2002). They will write a description of the phenomenon, while maintaining a strong connection to the topic of inquiry (Creswell, 2002). Phenomenology is not only a description but also a process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). On the other hand, Moustakas' (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology emphasizes less of the interpretations of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of the

participants. It also focuses on Husserl's concepts, *epoche,* or "bracketing." Bracketing is the action of suspending the impact of the outer world and incorporating the researcher's individuals' beliefs about the phenomena in order to see it more lucidly (Husserl, 1970).

I will be utilizing hermeneutical phenomenology in my study because it allows me the permission to underscore the fact that students who experience the phenomena of being Asian American transracial adoptees are impacted in the ways they make-meaning with their racial identities and engage in activism and advocacy work due to the pasts they bring to the institutions, as well as the histories of these institutions themselves. What is salient for me is the potential to show that *my* experiences could be *our;* she could be him, he could be them. My goal of this study is not to find a definite conclusion, but rather my hope is that if other people come across this work, it will prompt them to question and further explore this phenomenon. In a sense: a call to action.

Challenges of Phenomenology

Phenomenology provides a complex understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals (Creswell, 2002). Knowing and exploring these common experiences can be a valuable asset, specifically in higher education and student affairs in working with diverse student populations. There are some challenges and limitations when it comes to utilizing this study. It can involve a mainstream for of data collection by including only single and multiple interviews of the selected participants (Creswell, 2002). Phenomenology also requires an understanding of broader philosophical assumptions, identified by the researcher (Creswell, 2002). Participants in this study will need to be carefully chosen in that all the individuals have experienced the phenomenon that is being explored (Creswell, 2002). In doing so, I will be able to have a common understanding. Bracketing personal

experiences may be difficult for me and overall, they need to decide how and in what way their personal understandings will be intertwined in the study (Creswell, 2002).

The Closest Thing to Freedom

While there are other qualitative methods to guide my study, I have strategically chosen phenomenology to amplify the voices and share the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees. Phenomenology is essentially the lived experience or the life of the world (van Maanen, 2007) and embraces the voices of those who have been marginalized. That is why my decision to engage in phenomenology is "me" and is bold. Bold in the sense that it allows me the potential to show how our experiences as Asian American transracial adoptees are collective, but also phenomenology is freedom. For me personally, in being a transracial adoptee, so often our narratives our decided for us – being given up, the families we are adopted by, who we should be, and what we should become. Often, we have not been given a chance to write our own narratives, and moreover be empowered to articulate and share them. In that sense, utilizing phenomenology is a tool that can give myself and so many other adoptees a voice and a chance to be heard. It is the one aspect that allows our narratives to be read and our truths to be told; it is the closest thing to freedom we will ever get.

Data Collection Procedures

This section will discuss my procedures for collecting data to answer my study's driving question. I used purposeful criterion sampling strategy to select individuals. According to Patton (1990), purposeful criterion sampling allows the researcher to select information-rich cases as participants. These cases allow the researcher to learn in-depth,

about issues central to the purpose of the research study and can be only selected through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). I used this type of sampling to review and select at least five participants that met the predetermined criteria. Those criteria include the following: Asian American graduate students (ages 22-35); transracial and transnational adoptees who were raised by at least one white parent in the United States; and students who have engaged in activism and advocacy work. To ensure participants met this criterion, before engaging in the interview process, each participant was asked to fill out a "Participant Intake Form" (See Appendix A).

The permitted site for research includes the University of Arizona (UA) and utilization of Zoom video chat to communicate with students that do not attend the UA. Participants engaged in one semi-structured, audio-recorded interview, that lasted between forty-five minutes to no more than ninety minutes and an opportunity for member checking to ensure their stories were accurately portrayed and understood by the primary investigator.

Recruitment

Participants are being identified through personal connections in the transracial adoptee community, and through social media groups. In being transparent in my study, I would like to mention that my participant criterion did indeed change throughout the recruitment process. I had originally intended to engage with undergraduate students (ages 18-25) rather than graduate students. I will briefly discuss my change in participants below.

In beginning the recruitment process, I first created a participant recruitment memo (see Appendix B) to let people know more information regarding my study and the types of participants I was looking to recruit. I then strategically thought about the best way to go

about sharing this information. The first strategy I engaged in was using my own personal connections with friends and colleagues that are also transracial adoptees, engage in scholarship and research with this community, or specifically work with students that identify as transracial adoptees. With permission from their students, I was given their email addresses and directly reached out to these students to see if were potentially interested in participating in my study.

As a second strategy, I thought about my own higher education and student affairs journey and the NASPA and ACPA competencies. I chose to utilize a particular form of technology, social media. Twitter in particular, is a social media platform I engage on quite frequently and have found kinship and community with other adoptees. I was able to recruit participants by posting my recruitment memo on my own personal Twitter profile and through people retweeting and "liking" my post so more people would see it. Lastly, I posted in groups on Facebook, such as "Transracial Adoptees in Higher Education," "Transracial Adoptee Perspectives," and the "Korean American Adoptee Family Network." I also posted on my own personal Facebook page and made the post "public," so friends and colleagues were able to share the post with their own networks.

The recruitment process was quite a learning experience for me. I received an overwhelming amount of support from colleagues and friends sharing my study with their own personal networks and I originally had about 15 undergraduate students that met the criteria not only express interest in my study but fill out the participant intake form to engage in the next steps of the study. I reached out to each individual that filled out the form to move forward in the interview process. After waiting a week, I then followed up again to see if they were still interested. It was during this time I learned one of the challenges of

research and I unfortunately only heard back from two of the participants. After careful consideration, consulting with a few members on my thesis committee, and speaking with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I decided that changing my targeted population from undergraduate students to graduate students would be the best decision in the interest of time. Changing my targeted group of participants was challenging for me at first and quite frankly, I felt like I had failed before the study had even started. But after some personal reflection and speaking my thesis chair, I realized that it was indeed alright that my group of participants had changed throughout this process. I was reminded that this is first and foremost a master's thesis, and it is a learning process and experience, and sometimes these unfortunate realities and learning experiences are part of it.

Within two days, I was able to identify, recruit, and set-up interview times with five graduate students that all met my participant criterion. As mentioned previously, I still do believe it's important to disaggregate the data and experiences of undergraduate students from graduate students because of time, their place in student and identity development, and their unique experiences. This is ultimately why I chose to focus on solely graduate students and not combine my study with a mixed pool of undergraduate and graduate participants. A more detailed description and outline of each student will be presented in the chapters to follow.

Data Recording Process

In this study, I refer to my data collected as "participant narratives," as these are the lived experiences and own truths of my participants and this study aimed to embrace their voices which have historically been marginalized (van Manen, 2007). Moreover, these

narratives come from real, tangible people, in which I attempt to collectively make meaning of their individual, historical and life situations to understand a certain aspect of human existence (van Manen, 2007). I collected these participant narratives through a recording procedure, interview transcriptions, and member checking. As a means to try and identify my own biases and separate my own truth from my participant narratives, on my own, I also reflected upon and answered each question that was posed to my participants.

I selected five graduate students and collected data through one in-depth interview and an opportunity for member checking to ensure their narrative was understood and captured accurately. Once all the interviews and member checking processes were complete, I went through each narrative and highlighted collective themes, experiences, and key words and compiled a list of my findings.

Types of Data Collection

I conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant with an opportunity for member checking. Interviews have been characterized as samples of social reality (Czraniawska, 2004). The interview focused on the background of their adoption narratives, their understanding of their own racial identities, defining activism and advocacy work, and their experiences of engaging in his work while being in the academy in attempt to gain a deeper understanding in to their own truths (See Appendix C). In addition, Fontana & Frey (1998) stated that a rapport and trust with participants was imperative to a research's success. In order to establish a rapport and trust with my participants, I engaged in a few strategies.

First, in using a semi-structured interview protocol approach, it involved open-ended questions, in which my questions were carefully ordered, predetermined, and presented

(Krathwohl, 1998). In comparison to a structured interview, myself as the researcher had the freedom to probe responses and ask further questions as needed. However, I do want to note that because there was flexibility for me as the researcher to ask further questions, it may have resulted in asking differently worded questions that resulted in different response (Patton, 1990). Second, in the interview I asked participants a few "rapport-building" questions that lead into questions which focused on understanding their racial identities and experiences as transracial adoptees. These questions included: "Could you tell me a bit about your adoption story? The information and context such as where you were born, if you know why your adoptive family chose to adopt, how old you were, etc." "Can you describe the community you grew up in? Was it diverse or predominantly one race?" "At what point in your life did you start to think of yourself or identify as a transracial adoptee?" To further build trust and rapport, I would also share some of own adoption narrative and experiences as a transracial adoptee and ways I could relate to the narratives they had so boldly shared with me.

I audio-recorded each interview using the recording feature on Zoom. Recording the interview increased the accurate of data collection and allowed me to remain focused and attentive to each of the participants (Patton, 1990). Because recording does not fully exclude the need to take notes, I also kept a piece of paper and a pen next to me during each interview so I could write down thought sand questions that came to mind as each participant was speaking. This would later help support in my analysis (Patton, 1990).

As Josselson (2007) so beautifully put, concluding an interview process with a participant requires special attention because they may have shared important and vulnerable aspects of their lives and may feel a connection to the interviewer; it should not feel like ending the process of psychotherapy. I followed Josselson's recommendation in ending an

interview and asked each participant how they were feeling, if there was anything else they wanted to share with me or that I had missed, or if they had any specific questions for me. As I invited each participant to engage in this, I also shared my gratitude and appreciation for contributing to my work. An example of a statement I used included, “I appreciate your time, openness, honestly, and vulnerability in sharing your experiences with me. I have learned a lot from you and tit will only further strengthen and contribute to the work I am doing; thank you.” (Josselson, 2007).

Following the interviews, I would try and transcribe each file within the next couple of days so the conversation would remain fresh in my mind, and so each participant could receive a copy of their transcription for member checking in a timely manner. Because of limited resources and wanting to engage in the learning experience of transcribing and analysis, I transcribed each interview by myself. I first opened each audio recording and uploaded it to iMovie. I then was able to slow the speed of each interview down to 65%. This way I could type with ease as I listened to each interview. Following the initial transcription, I went back and listened to each interview again and edited any mistakes or typos and sent a copy of the transcription to the respective participant. Due to my limited amount of time, I asked participants if they could try and return their transcriptions to me with any edits or comments within a week of the date I sent the transcription to them.

Limitations of Study

As I have learned throughout my time as a master’s student, with all research endeavors comes with limitations. First this study was constrained by practical limitations of time and resources. Because of the short nature master’s programs being between 1-2 years

and being a novice at conducting a research study from start to finish, only about four months was permitted to conduct the actual study and analysis portion of this thesis. Because of this, time only permitted one interview with each participant. I also recognized the time my participants were able to commit to the study was also limited, due to their own personal and academic obligations in their respective programs. In regard to resources and the number of transracial adoptees that met my specific criterion, most of my participants resided in states outside of Arizona so I was unable to meet them in-person and observe their various environments. My understanding of their experiences and spaces relied heavily on participant's bravery and vulnerability to share with me their personal narratives and truths.

Second, due to reasons in the aforementioned, I have a small sample size of five participants. Because of my small sample size, it should be noted that the narratives and this study overall does not encompass the entire Asian American transracial adoptee experience and as a researcher, I am not speaking on behalf of the experiences of all transracial adoptees. In addition, because of my specific criterion for participating in this study in only looking at the experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees, again, this does not encompass the entire experience of all transracial adoptees. Future studies should consider including the perspectives of other non-Asian American transracial adoptees and how we can disaggregate and compare this data.

Furthermore, the nature of participant recruitment was such that only students that self-identified as Asian American could participate in this study. I had previously discussed my strategic intention to only look at the experiences of Asian Americans and not Pacific Islanders due to their unique experiences and how they differ from Asian Americans. But even in saying "Asian American," the dominant narrative in using this is often associated with

solely East Asians (Korean, Chinese, Japanese) and the voices of South and Southeast Asians are too often forgotten and excluded. I have also been reflecting much on how our community is moving towards using the term "APIDA" (Asian Pacific Islander Desi American); but what does it mean for us to use this acronym when we actively engage in excluding (both intentionally and unintentionally) the voices and experiences of Pacific Islanders and Desi Americans? Future scholarship should also consider the ways in which it is important to disaggregate this data, but also in finding ways to encompass the entire APIDA experience in our research, scholarship, and praxis.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the collective findings and key themes that emerged from my participant's narratives that addressed and related to my driving research question: **How does engaging in activism and advocacy work support Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees in making meaning of their racial identities?** These themes include but are not limited to: But I'm Adopted, Activism Is Survival, and Model-Model Minorities. To give the reader a better perspective about the participant narratives I will be sharing, I first have outlined some of the participant demographics. Each participant selected their own pseudonym and all identifiable information has been removed or coded to protect the privacy of my participants (See Table 1). Because my research question involves the experiences of activism and advocacy work, I have also included how my participants collectively defined activism and advocacy in their words to support in providing additional context.

Table 1

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Geographic Region
Christian Van	Vietnamese	West Coast
Daniel	Cambodian	East Coast
Faye	Chinese	South
Jeon	Korean	Southeast
Olive	Chinese	Pacific Northwest

Activism and Advocacy (as defined by participants)

"You might not be able to open the door all the way,

but at least you can get something in the cracks." -Daniel

I asked each of my participants to what activism and advocacy means to them and how define it. Some of the collective words and themes participants shared included:

- Invoking some sort of change
- Unpacking collective experiences and what they mean
- Continuously being knowledgeable and educating yourself about a particular issue or community
- Having a basic understanding of social justice and the ways that power and privilege influence everyday actions
- Bringing awareness and uplifting the voices of certain aspects, characteristics, systems, or structures that marginalize a specific group of people

In the beginning of this study, I had loosely defined it as intentional actions to bring about social, political, and racial change. I also discussed that I was allowing my participants to define what activism and advocacy work meant to them, in recognizing that activism comes in many different forms. Given that much of the activism and advocacy work narrative is often associated with protests and demonstrations, it was interesting to see how my participants identified, in the fact that none of them mentioned the words, "protest" or "demonstration." It was wonderful to see the critical thought and engagement in how they chose to define activism and how it challenged my own implicit notions of what activism and advocacy work is and means. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to sharing the main themes I found in the ways that engaging and activism and advocacy work supported these students in making-meaning with their racial identities as Asian American transracial adoptees.

…But

"…but I'm not whatever you assume me to be." -Christian Van

The first collective experience participants discussed was this idea of there always being "but." Growing up several of the participants shared how the questioning their identity was never because they did not know who they were, but rather because people put this doubt and question into their minds. A male participant shared an instance from when he was younger:

> "I was asked constantly by classmates, 'what kind of Asian are you.' And I would be like, 'oh I'm Vietnamese, *but* I'm adopted.' So, it was always something I had to say because I'm adopted, I'm not really Vietnamese or I didn't really feel I was."

Several of the participants shared a similar story in feeling like they had to "out" themselves as being adopted because they did not share the same experiences as non-adopted Asian Americans. A female participant shared that she was comfortable in identifying as a transracial adoptee, but it was easier to say, "I'm a transracial adoptee, I'm in the middle, *but* I'm trying to learn more about my Chinese culture."

Another male participant shared that part of his activism was to educate himself and learn more about his identity so he could more easily navigate these types of race and identity conversations:

> "The more I've been able to articulate my messages, the more, I want to say, easier the conversations are. It's a lot easier to convey these types of messages as you become more knowledgeable. Back when I was in high school, I was like, 'yeah, I'm adopted' and people would ask me, 'oh what's that like?' My response was always 'I don't know because I didn't have the data, the hxstory, the knowledge and the ability to articulate my experiences. So, then people had all these biases and preferences about Asians from other sources, like movies. But now that I'm older I am able to better articulate my story and message and can provide more transparency into the experiences and actually have some sort of meaningful conversation that can be impactful as an activist."

Activism Is Survival

*"No, I'm just trying to f*cking survive." -Christian Van*

Participants also shared that part of engaging in activism and advocacy work was *because* of their identities. Being Asian American transracial adoptees, they understand that despite the stereotypes of Asians (i.e. model minority myth) and often being perceived as white because of their transracial adoptee identity, at the end of the day, they will always be seen as a person of color and treated as inferior to the dominant white society. It is because of this one female participant in particular said:

> "I think a lot about what we deem, or when people say, 'your activism is great work,' but in reality, sometimes we just look at people and say no this is survival and our everyday experiences just to live a decent life."

This participant's comment clarify how sometimes activism and advocacy work can invoke change, but the underlying reasons can often be just to try and walk through the world with everyone else. Another male participant also reflected on folx who in hxstory we have looked back on and title them "activists":

> "I'm wondering if you would have said if we would have asked them if they would have called themselves activists? I'm sure there might have been some who might have said they were, but I'm sure there also would have been others who would say they're just trying to transform the world in a manner that permits them to exist."

This participant's thoughts bring about an important discussion about defining who is an "activist," which will be discussed later in the next chapter.

Last, another female participant shared her experience of watching the Black Lives Matter movement happen in the United States while she was studying abroad:

> "I think that it kind of empowered me in some ways. Just like realizing that I would experience racism in every part of the world and other people would too. In that

moment it became really real."

Many participants expressed similar sentiments in realizing how their racial identities would affect how they were able to exist and navigated through the world.

Not Your Model (-Model) Minority

"We're always held to this standard of being Asian but also white." -Faye

In looking at being perceived as a "real" Asian and the privileges and immunity they appear to benefit from because of their white families, every participant was able to recognize this in their own narrative. One female participant shared:

> "I think that I also feel guilt for not like or kind of being in between or having an identity that I was raised by in such close proximity to whiteness but also at the same time wasn't raised in a community that looks like me. I think there's a lot of dissonance in who I share my story with and how I share my story because I'm always aware of my proximity to whiteness, but getting pushback and trying to prove myself to both communities."

Another female participant shared her truth:

> "I'm just really aware of the privilege I have. From a People of Color perspective, I'm really aware of the model minority and how people do not think Asians experience racism. But then, I'm also like, 'okay, my parents weren't immigrants, they're middle class white people, and their whiteness throughout me growing up kind of like protected me from things.' People would see us together and it wasn't like, 'Oh it's an Asian family and they don't know how to speak English. They probably work

> at a nail salon, or whatever.' It was, 'Oh this is a little orphan and her white parents are these great people and the whole family package is perfection.' Because saviors, and I'm like this little Asian girl who's probably going to be a straight-A student, good at math, etc. So, yeah. I guess just understanding how much privilege but also being a person of color…it's just such a weird place to be."

In addition to recognizing the privilege that often comes with being a transracial adoptee, as they two participants have outlined, there are still these feelings of being "enough" for both communities. One participant shares his experience in this in the following remarks:

> "The agency I was adopted from would have socials with other adopted kids. When I was younger my mom tried to put me in these socials, but I didn't want to interact with them because I didn't want anything to do with them. But in retrospect I think I realized that at a very young age, I had started to internalize racist ideologies. And so, one of the things that I've reflected on a lot is because I saw them as 'other' because I then internalized the 'otherness' and I didn't want to be part of it. I wanted to fit in with my mother. And that wasn't to say I wanted to be white, but basically, I'm saying I wanted to be this white person because growing up I was like, 'I'm not really that Asian.' And then I would reinforce that because then other kids would be like, 'Oh you're not really that Asian.' And I would say, 'Oh yah, you're right.'"

This story is just one of many of realities adoptees have to face in choosing when to identify with their either or none of their identities at certain points in their lives. These feelings of being enough continue to arise as another participant shares:

> "I understand the ways that identity can be constructed and then also the way I can construct my own identity the way that I choose to identify; the way I choose to

understand the way I identify. So, there's that layer. And then there's this other layer that says none of that matters because you still feel insecure and you're still having these feelings about never being enough."

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings that emerged from the data analysis through three themes: (1) …But (2) Activism Is Survival and (3) Not Your Model (-Model Minority). I attempted to do this in bringing together verbatim quotations from each participant interview

Three key themes emerged from my interviews with participants that supported in addressing my driving question of how Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees make-meaning with their racial identities through engaging in activism and advocacy work. In presenting these narratives in this general structured, I hoped to provide a framework for understanding the participants' experiences of navigating the world as an Asian American transracial/transnational adoptee. This general structure was adaptable in capturing the unique and collective reality of each participant's experience. I will engage in a discussion of other thoughts and questions that arose throughout this study, as well as theoretical and practical implications of the study and provide suggestions for future research in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VI: DICSUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion of Themes

After summarizing some of the narratives shared by participants, I tried to make my presence as a researcher in this section lucid by integrating my own thoughts and interpretations based on these quotes and conversations with the participants. I identified three themes that illuminate their own personal experiences in engaging in activism and advocacy

work as transracial adoptees, as also a collective experience. First, when talking about being an Asian American transracial adoptee, there is also a "*but*." It is never simply, "I am Asian American." It is, "I am Asian American, *but* I'm adopted." Second, the salience of their racial identities impacted how and why they choose to engage in various aspects of activism and advocacy work. Third, all participants shared stories of their internal conflict of always being too Asian to be white, but too white to be Asian and trying to be "enough" for both of their communities.

Museus & Iftikar's (2013) core tenet, Story, Theory, and Praxis played a key role in my decision to present and approach this study through a lens of storytelling. Many of the stories and counterrstories shared by the participants were significant in analyzing he experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees and advocating for this community. It also helped to inform theory and practice and as seen throughout some of the participant narratives, facilitated a positive individual and social transformation by centering the voices of Asian American transracial adoptees. In addition to identifying these themes, I also situate the themes in existing scholarship and theory discussed in Chapter II and III.

But I'm Adopted

"It really leaves me speechless because I don't think anyone can really understand it, except for us. I feel like I don't have to explain what I'm saying;

Asian transracial adoptees just understand." -Faye

The first theme centers on the fact that Asian American and transracial identities are experienced in a complex manner, apparent in the narratives shared by some of the participants

through interweaving racial identity, identity salience, physical appearance, culture, and stereotypes. Participants discussed the impact of looking one way, but feelings of being an imposter because of the dominant narrative surrounding what it means to be an "Asian American." *But* was commonly used not only in re-telling their narratives, but even as what appears to be a way to say that they know they are not what people expect them to be. It is noteworthy that this *but* can be harmful and a form of racism in itself, as these feelings of not being Asian "enough" have often been projected onto these participants. One female participant recalled being told that she "doesn't really count," when it comes to the Asian American population.

The participants' comments and experiences suggest that their awareness of their own racial identities as Asian Americans and transracial adoptees was always salient, but further interacting and engaging in activism and advocacy work helped shaped their understanding in how they are perceived as adoptees. But at the same time, it has become a place of power. A female participant shared that part of her motivation and desire to engage in activism is to help people understand that there are different sides to every story and in doing this, she hopes to share her knowledge and encourage people to start having these complex conversations around racial identity. It appeared to me that in many of their experiences, this "*but"* became an "*and*" with an empowerment and desire to invoke change and redefine the hegemonic narrative around the experiences of transracial adoptees.

Museus and Iftikar (2013) highlight the reality of universal exclusion of Asian Americans in American hxstory, but I also believe that this core tenet of AsianCrit can indeed apply to how non-adoptees (both Asian American and other communities) both intentionally and unintentionally contribute to the invisibility and silence of further developing the Asian

American narrative. In (re)examining existing narratives to amplify the voices and roles of Asian Americans in these hxstories (e.g., Chan, 1991; Takaki, 1998; Tamura, 2001, 2003; Umemoto, 1989), this means we must also think critically and be more intentional about how we are including *all* voices and narratives of the Asian American community.

Thriving or Surviving?

> "My understanding of my own racial identity and how it's impacted the activism and advocacy work I do dominates my life. It's at the forefront of my mind every day; it's the reason I try and go the extra mile." -Jeon

The second theme highlighted the reality that often times activism and advocacy work is not always about trying to change the system, but rather a means of trying to survive and changing the system is a result of their persistence to walk through life. Participants shared similar notions in the sense they know they are often treated as if they are racially white, but they will always move through this world and be treated as inferior and part of the minority.

The participants' commitment to social justice as highlighted by Museus and Iftikar (2014) in AsianCrit became more than apparent to me throughout this study. Through hearing their narratives about the work, they have done and are currently engaging in, they have all show they are committed to eliminating all forms of oppression and systems of domination. While participants defined for themselves and supported me in defining what activism and advocacy work is, I also came to reflect upon how their pure existence, both inside and outside the academy, is resistance and a form of activism and advocacy in itself. The salience of their identities and knowing exactly who they are and how they move through this world

are some of the very reasons they choose to continue to engage in this commitment, despite the fact they live these experiences every single day. Being in tune with their Asian American and transracial adoptee identity and community supported them in realizing there are many different voices in all communities that need to be heard and elevated.

Too White To Be Asian, Too Asian To Be White

"It's bizarre to me; this place that we're in because everyone sees us as super-star students, but then we have white parents…" -Faye

In the sections above, I discussed a term I am proposing in describing how Asian American transracial adoptees are perceived by non-adoptee peers. The first "model" describes the arguably most infamous stereotype in the Asian American community (model minority myth). The second "model" describes the white families in which Asian American transracial adoptees are raised by and the pressure these adoptees may feel to racially assimilate to the dominate white culture, how they are not perceived as being "real" Asians by non-adopted peers, and the privileges and immunity they may benefit from because of the white families they are raised by.

Although I proposed this term, I was interested to see if my own experience was also a collective experience shared by other transracial adoptees, or if my experience was uniquely my own. After conducting interviews with my participants, I had mixed feelings. I felt comfort and solidarity in seeing that one experience, was many people's experience, but horrified at the same time to know that *my* experience, was also *our* experience. All of the participants in some way

shared similar sentiments of being perceived and treated as a model-model minority, but either did not know what to call it and/or did not know how to feel about it.

Participant's narratives were consistent with the first core tenet of AsianCrit: Asianization. It refers to the ways in which White Supremacy shape the racialization of Asian Americans as threatening foreigners, model minorities, and sexually abnormal emasculated men and hypersexualized womxn (Chew, 1994; Cho, 2003; Chon, 1995; Espiritu, 1993; Lowe, 1996; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Prasso, 2005). Racial Asianization is also a common use of racism where society racially oppresses Asian Americans. To me this was apparent through what the participant's shared in not only how society racially oppresses them for being in-between and being neither this nor that, but also how the Asian American community projects these feelings onto transracial adoptees that they will never be Asian "enough" because of the white parents they are raised by.

While the experiences are completely different for each of these communities, I also observed some consistence's with Renn's Ecological Theory of Mixed-Race Identity Development and Hartlep and Suda's (forthcoming) adaptation of Renn's theory. Several of the participant's shared some of their experiences in college and engaging and activism and advocacy work, and how their appearance often did not match their name or ethnic identity, and they had a difficult time being accepted by their peers.

Names were an aspect that came up in each of my interviews, in consistently seeing participant's birth names being changed once they were adopted. Often times their "new name" and adoptive family's last names had European roots, and this not only made it more challenging for them to be accepted by their Asian peers, but also as an immediate way they had to "out" themselves as being adopted (but I'm adopted). The degree of fluency and self-awareness that

these participants had with their racial/ethnic identities and cultures greatly impacted the extent to which they engaged in specific aspects of activism and advocacy work, were accepted by their peers, and saw themselves as belonging to groups that were reflective of their own backgrounds and personal way of identifying.

Reflections and Final Thoughts

"I wonder if the term activism gets hijacked. Like by folx who do it performatively;
'Oh, look this is me doing an act of activism!' And then I think it can also get hijacked by
people whose identities are in positions of power;
people who have identities who probably are privileged." -Christian Van

Throughout the interviews and listening to the narratives my participants so courageously shared with me, I began to wonder and question what does it actually mean for us to self-identify as activists when we also perpetuate acts of oppression within our communities and in other marginalized communities?[5] (i.e. antiblackness) One of the last conversations I had in particular with Christian Van started to clarify this question, but also have new questions and thoughts emerge. I would like to preface this conversation that these are simply thoughts, ideas, reflections, and personal opinions that are uniquely our own.

Christian Van talked about how for him activism is consciousness, and consciousness is power. It was interesting to me that Christian Van had a similar definition to the other participants of defining activism and said he has engaged in these different "acts," however he

[5] In thinking about this work, instances of horizontal violence occurred while interviewing participants. Subsequent work should explore this phenomenon of horizontal violence in our communities.

himself said he does not feel comfortable referring to himself as an "activist." This relates back to one of the questions that I began to reflect upon throughout my study: what does it mean for us to self-identify as activists?

In answering this question, our conversation started to lean towards maybe we do not personally get to say we are an activist. Christian Van related it to people not getting to decide if they are an ally or referring to ourselves as "woke." Perhaps it is something others get to say about us, but not necessarily something we get to identify for ourselves. As Christian Van put it being an activist is not a profession, so we do not necessarily think we can treat as such.

Our discussion continued as we talked about what is usually encompassed when we think about activism: social justice and being what is considered more "liberal" or "left-wing." Christian Van mentioned that we often define activism as some sort of change, but is it always necessarily tied to social justice? For instance, could there be a neo-conservative activist? Our conclusion of this portion of our conversation is that we honestly do not know. But in relation to identity and student development, activism is also reflection in personal growth and personal change.

As our conversation came to an end, we began to think about other words that might encompass this type of work more than saying "activism." I personally feel it is a word that often gets overused, so perhaps saying something such as transformative work or radical acts could be another way to approach talking about this type of work. Again, these are simply some of my thoughts and reflections that came up throughout this study and a wonderful conversation I had with Christian Van that I felt was valuable to add to this narrative. These conversations if anything, made me excited to continue these deeper and more critical

conversations, and to be bold and unafraid in challenging and questioning some of these implicit biases and hegemonic narratives.

Implications of Study

Theoretical Implications

"We have all learned it somewhere." -Christian Van

This study provided in-depth glance into the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees engaging in activism and advocacy work. In comparison to other studies I have seen done focusing on identity development of transracial adoptees, this study incorporated another layer of what I believe contributes to identity development, activism and advocacy work, and used phenomenology to amplify the collective voices and experiences of these students. Future research is imperative and mandatory to further amplify and explore the narratives of Asian American transracial adoptee students and their lived experiences.

These theoretical implications emerged from the conversations and findings with the participants that are intertwined with each other, in examining how Asian American transracial adoptees make-meaning with their racial identities. First, while the development of Asian American identity theories has evolved in unbelievable capacities, many of these theories still exclude the voices and experiences of transracial adoptees. I want to recognize that theory is not everything, and that the lived experiences inform these theories, but theory also does inform practice and is a wonderful foundation for beginning to understand the lived experiences and narratives of marginalized communities. I propose that we begin to develop a transracial adoptee identity development theory and even a TRACrit. Many transracial

adoptee scholars have already begun this process and even proposed theories and ideas of their own, but for me personally, I have yet to see anything that has "stuck" and been used consistently in our field.

In relation to theory, I also believe that we need to start disaggregating and treating transracial adoptee identity as its own racial identity. In conversations I had with the participants, it was clear that it was not always about being Asian enough or being accepted as white; it was really about being to identify solely as a transracial adoptee, because it really is just that. And not only that, but have those experiences and narratives heard and valued. Being a transracial adoptee is an experience of its own and has its own nuances. It is inseparable from any other aspect of an adoptees identity because we are all those things at once. Perhaps identifying as a transracial adoptee solely is articulating this complexities and tension.

There also needs to be training for folx in academia. Often times professors, scholars, and practitioners enter a new university unaware of the culture and community climate. Perhaps some sort of cultural competency training for instance could be beneficial in shifting the responsibility back to the university as a stakeholder and an institution that should be more committed to ensuring this work and the voices of transracial adoptee students are seen, heard, and validated both inside and outside the classroom.[6]

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[6] There have been numerous occasions where I have been asked about implications for the TRA community. In thinking about the transracial adoptee community, what many scholars and practitioners do not realize is that a large majority of the TRA community is already mobilized as a group and the TRA community itself is not where the problem lies. There are resources available and accessible to all; TRA's are here and existing at our universities, fighting every day to be seen and acknowledged. The problem lies within the active negligence of the academy in ignoring these implications and community.

Lastly, while I believe the first implication in all of this is for institutions to begin to recognize and acknowledge that transracial adoptees exist, all of this (including the aforementioned), this needs to happen in synchronization with race. It is a common practice to hear scholars, practitioners, and administrators saying we should be having conversations around race and it should be something we are consistently discussing but navigating these conversations and racial boundaries also needs to happen. I suggest that before we can have these conversations around our own experiences with race, we need to have a better understanding of how race and whiteness were constructed; where did race come from? What even is race? When we understand the origins of race, then we can better understand how racial identity impacts the lives of people of color who cross those racial boundaries.

Implications for Practice

"We are part of the Asian American diaspora and there's a large community, but there needs to be ways for us to be a part of that community, as well as on a larger scale of the APIDA community and conversations in how we get aggregated in data." -Olive

With any marginalized identity there are numerous nuances in educating and being the one to educate because there is little to no representation of this community. It is important we do not put that emotional labor of transracial adoptees and expect them to share their experiences and stories. With that, we need to keep in mind to meet students where they are at. Not all TRA's are comfortable sharing their stories; many might not identify as being TRA or are not ready to explore that part of their identity. We also need to be conscious of when we are challenging students to think about their experiences and what shapes their identities and when it is better to take a support role. Many TRA's have had traumatic experiences and pasts, and institutions of

higher education are often the first time they are exploring this part of their identity or a place they consider safe.

In not placing the burden and emotional labor on TRA's to share their narratives and educate us, it is important that we then educate ourselves and not assume when we are unsure. There are more resources out there than people realize. This can include an example is the numerous Facebook groups such as Transracial Adoptee Perspectives (TAP), scholarly Twitter accounts, articles, blogs, and documentaries.

There are times when TRA's will want to share their stories and be willing to educate scholars, practitioners, and professionals in the field. It is important to recognize that this is a privilege to be able to learn from them, and that their narratives and experiences are valid. They are the best educators because they are the ones that live these experiences every single day. While theory informs practice, student's lived experiences inform theory and a student's personal narrative will tell us more than any theory or textbook will ever. It is also important that when we have the privilege to listen to the stories of TRA's, that we do so to truly understand, recognize, and validate their experiences as transracial adoptee students.

Community is also important. Some of the participants expressed and shared that being a TRA is an invisible identity in the sense that when looking at them solely based on appearance, one could not tell that they are adopted. To my knowledge, there is usually no option for transracial adoptee students to self-report their adoptee identity when entering higher education institutions. I suggest that admission processes begin to include a box for adoptees to self-identify themselves. If we do not know who is in our institutions, it is impossible to serve and support them. Having a sense of belonging and being surrounded by others that identify

similar can contribute to a positive college experience because they feel that they matter and their experiences as TRA's are valued.

Finally, because the TRA community is still growing and most people are still unware, uneducated, and do not engage in this community, we need to work to create intentional spaces for TRA's to be seen and heard. Similar practices and approaches used in creating spaces that center students of color's identities and experiences can also be used to create spaces for adoptees and center the adoptee experience. This can include addressing and challenging assumptions made about race, culture, ethnicity, family, heritage and ancestry as it relates to adoptees. Even more than creating these spaces, it is also important that we are not only creating these new spaces but transforming current spaces to be inclusive of adoptees and their experiences. As higher education and student affairs professionals, we must do the work in researching, reading, and learning about the adoptee experiences so we can fully support TRA students in their development and engage in discussions of the adoptee experience.

Conclusion

The purpose this phenomenological study was to explore the collective experiences of how Asian American transracial/transnational adoptees in how they make-meaning with their racial identities through engaging in activism and advocacy work. The lived experiences of the participants revealed a rich and complex narratives how the individual experiences of participants engaging in this work, was also a collective experience shared by many others who identify the same way. These narratives highlighted three themes that capture past, present, and future experiences related to transracial adoptees experiences in activism and advocacy work. The salience of how they have made meaning with their racial identities is evident, but also the challenges they all still face in having to choose when to identify with

one or none of their identities at certain points in their lives, and confronting feelings of being "enough."

The lived experiences and truths of these participant's lived experiences are just a glimpse into the complexities of being an Asian American transracial/transnational adoptee. And if I'm being frank, I believe as Asian American transracial adoptees these complexities and our fight will always exist; we will always be between two worlds and never quite "enough" for white people and communities of color. But this study has shown the power in our community and how we will never do this work alone, even if it can feel isolating at times. As I mentioned in my methodology section, my hope in conducting this study was not to come to a definitive conclusion, but rather prompt others to question and explore this even further. My hope in contributing this piece of scholarship to the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs is that others will continue to speak the stories and identities of transracial adoptees into existence, so our community no longer continues to be invisible and we can exist in spaces where we are not only enough, but our experiences are validated, and our voices are heard.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Intake Form

Participant Intake Form

Hello! My name is Hannah Hyun White. I am an Asian American adoptee. I was born in Seoul, South Korea, adopted at four-months-old, and raised in and by a White American family in Scottsdale, Arizona. I am also a Master's student at the University of Arizona in the Higher Education program. For my thesis research, I am studying the ways in which transracial/transnational Asian American adoptees make-meaning with their racial identities through engaging in racial justice activism work. When I was in college, I found that others' perceptions of me racially often differed from how I identified myself as a transracial adoptee and was often criticized and critiqued for my engagement in racial justice activism work. This study aims to provide transracial Asian American adoptees in college the opportunity to have their voices amplified and share their own narratives regarding their engagement in advocacy work around race and racism. By doing so, this study has the potential to inform how higher education professionals and practitioners are engaging with and supporting this often invisible and misunderstood population of students.

If you are currently enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student, 18-35 years-old, an adoptee of Asian descent, born in a country outside the United States, adopted by and raised in a White American family (at least one parent), and are engaged or have previously engaged in racial justice activism work, you are eligible to participate in this study. Participation will involve one individual interview with me, as well as an opportunity for member checking to ensure your story was accurately captured and understood. Each interview will take approximately 45-90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in-person or virtually by Zoom. The cumulative total for participation including interviews and member checking is no more than three hours. Participation in this study is voluntary. All information collected will be confidential. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all data will be destroyed.

If you meet the study's selection criteria and are interested in participating, please complete the following online participant intake form (which should take less than 10 minutes). Please also feel free to share the link to this form with anyone else who may be interested in participating in this study. If you have any initial questions or concerns, you are welcome to contact me by email at hanwhite13@email.arizona.edu.

Thank you!

Hannah Hyun White
Master's Student, Center for the Study Higher Education
The University of Arizona

First Name *

Appendix A: Participant Intake Form

First Name *

Short answer text

Last Name *

Short answer text

Please identify a pseudonym (nickname) to protect your identity through the research process: *

Short answer text

What is the best email address to reach you at? *

Short answer text

What is the best phone number to reach you at? *

Short answer text

I am seeking participants who meet the following criteria: currently enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program as a graduate student, 18-35 years old, adoptee of Asian descent and born in a country outside the United States, adopted and raised in a White, American family (at least one parent), engaging or previously engaged in racial justice activism work. Do you meet this criteria? *

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Memo

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me a bit about your adoption story? The information and context such as where you were born, if you know why your adoptive family chose to adopt, how old you were, etc.
2. At what point in your life did you start to think of yourself or identify as a transracial adoptee?
3. Can you describe the community you grew up in? Was it diverse or predominantly one race?
4. What is the environment and institutional culture like at the university/college you attend? How has this environment impacted you as an Asian American transracial adoptee?
5. In your own words, could you define activism?
6. Tell a little bit about the type of activism work you have been involved in at your institution.
7. Was there a particular event, moment, or person that empowered you to become involved in participating in activism and advocacy work?
8. How has your experience been engaging in activism and advocacy work? Have you received any pushback from your peers or other members of your institution?
9. How has being a TRA and understanding whiteness impacted you and your experiences in engaging in this type of activism work?
10. Is there anything you would like other educators or practitioners in the higher education/student affairs field to know about your experience as an Asian American TRA engaging in activism and advocacy work?
11. Is there anything I missed or don't know?

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